
From the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Screening Students for Problems: Testing Often is Not Needed

Clearly, efforts to prevent and identify learning, behavior, and emotional problems are an essential focus at schools. And data gathering plays a basic role in all this. However, assessments in the form of screening tests often are not the best practice for identifying students in need of help.

Concerns about screening tests are not new. However, the concerns too often are ignored as advocates call for predicting and identifying problem students. Examples of such screening include:

- Early-age screening for behavioral, emotional, and learning problems
- Drug testing at school
- Student threat assessment
- Screening for suicide risk

The realities are that in many instances teachers and parents already have identified youngsters who are having learning, behavior, and emotional problems and even have asked for help.

Unfortunately, formal screening tests often use up sparse resources that are needed for problem prevention and correction. And large-scale, first-level screening programs can produce many false positives, lead to premature prescription of "deep end" interventions, focus mainly on the role of factors residing in the child and thus collude with tendencies to "blame victims," and so forth. (The cost-benefit ratio for schools of using screening tests to identify students experiencing problems should be based on how much the data contribute to ameliorating the problems.)

In general, from the broad perspective of addressing barriers to learning and teaching, we argue the need is not for more testing. Plenty of data exist that point to (a) the many students who are not doing well and (b) the need for schools to transform their approaches to ameliorating problems.

In the wake of the pandemic, the increase in students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems is evident. Teachers are referring many more to student assistance and IEP teams. Rather than expending resources on assessments of need, we suggest that schools devote their limited time and sparse resources to transforming student/learning supports into a system that better addresses barriers to learning and teaching.

It is time to counter trends toward "assessment-itis." Providing help is essential; additional assessment often is not. Once appropriate interventions to ameliorate the problem are underway additional data for guiding the intervention certainly will be gathered, often using procedures such as response to intervention (RtI). We always need data; but it doesn't all need to come from formal tests.

The Center has online many resources focusing on these matters that can be used for staff discussion, continuing education, and planning. As a start, see, the following brief resources:

> *Rethinking Student and Learning Supports* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fall22.pdf>

> *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

For more in depth presentations, see the following free resources:

- >Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide

- >Improving School Improvement

- >Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change

all three can be accessed at

https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

As always, send all comments and questions, as well as requests for resources, TA, and coaching to Ltaylor@ucla.edu .